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KUALA LUMPUR FOR A/S HILL

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [KS](#) [KN](#)

SUBJECT: ROK MINISTER OF UNIFICATION'S "U.S. FAILED"  
REMARKS SPARK CONTROVERSY; MINISTRY'S DPRK PLANS ON HOLD

Classified By: CDA Joseph Y. Yun. Reasons 1.4 (b/d).

SUMMARY

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11. (C) South Korean Minister of Unification Lee Jong-seok's July 23 televised remark that the United States "failed the most" in not preventing North Korea from launching missiles on July 5 sparked a strong negative reaction from both sides of the aisle in the National Assembly and among editorialists. Senior officials in the Ministry of Unification (MOU) and in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade (MOFAT) defended his remarks to us as logical, saying that he meant the missiles were intended mainly as a provocation against the United States, but readily admit that it would have been better for him to focus his remarks on North Korea's ill-advised action and its failure to intimidate the international community. Meanwhile, MOU and MOFAT officials tell us that the post-missile-test impasse with North Korea marks a serious low point in MOU's effort to build linkages with the North. On the other hand, the impasse with the North is unlikely to change the long-term MOU strategy for eventual unification stretching over the next generation. END SUMMARY.

"U.S. FAILED THE MOST"  
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12. (U) Unification Minister Lee Jong-seok's July 23 televised remarks (recorded on July 19) were as follows (unofficial Embassy translation):

Q: One of the Roh Moo-hyun administration's three main principles in its North Korea policy is to assume an initiative role in its relationship with North Korea. When we look at the recent missile crisis, however, it makes one fundamentally question the role of the ROK government toward the DPRK. In fact, it makes one think that the ROK has a limited role on North Korea.

A: Yes. All of the North's neighbors including the ROK, China, the United States, and Japan expressed their positions that the DPRK should not launch its missiles. And all parties strongly warned the North Koreans on this. But none were able to prevent the DPRK from launching its missiles. If we look at this from a logical perspective and consider

the fact that the U.S. was the most active in warning the North Koreans, (we could say that) the United States failed the most because it couldn't prevent the North from launching its missiles.

The ROK and China also failed in dissuading the North. From this point of view, I acknowledge that the ROK failed, but this was also the case with other states in the international community. This just shows how difficult it is (for all of us) in persuading the North.

Later in the program came this exchange with Lee:

Q: There is concern about the U.S.-ROK alliance...

A: It is true that there are a few differences in opinion regarding issues on dealing with the North.

13. (U) The Korean and international press seized on the "U.S. failed the most" sound bite as a sign of friction with the USG. National Assembly members from both sides of the aisle criticized Lee: Uri Party member Chung Eui-yong said, "To officially confirm that there are differences is not a diplomatic practice. Senior officials of ministerial rank should refrain from such words." Another Uri Party member said Lee should give up his post as Chairman of the National Security Council Standing Committee, a position he holds concurrently with being Minister of Unification, while members of the conservative GNP opposition party blasted Lee as being soft on North Korea. Editorials in the conservative and centrist press were harsh too, saying that the government should wake up to the threat from the North. A JoongAng Daily editorial pointed that a North Korean official, Ahn Gyeong-ho, Director of North Korea's Secretariat of the Committee for the Peaceful Reunification of the Fatherland, threatened the South one month ago by saying the foremost victim of any war with the United States would be South Korea.

14. (U) President Roh Moo-hyun gave the controversy new life, and emphasized the sense of friction with the USG, by defending Lee's remarks on July 25:

"I do not understand why a South Korean minister had to be reproached at the National Assembly for saying U.S. policies were a failure. Cabinet ministers are supposed to speak straight from their own conviction and belief and sometimes have to refute questions from lawmakers. The ministers should always be ready to answer such questions with responses such as, 'Then are you insisting on suffocating North Korea?', 'Do you lawmakers think the U.S. is a faultless country?', and 'Do you lawmakers believe South Korea should keep mum about policy mistakes by the U.S.?','" Roh said.

15. (C) Our contacts in the Ministry of Unification, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, and the National Security Council defend the strict logic of Lee's remarks -- since the United States, they say, was the primary "target" of the July 5 missile tests and therefore the primary "victim" -- but they also acknowledge that the sense of division with the United States is the wrong message. MOU Director for the International Cooperation Team J.R. Kim (Kim Chong-no) said that even though his Minister's remarks were logical, he would have recommended a different, more pro-U.S. approach.

16. (C) In a July 26 conversation with National Security Advisor Song Min-Soon, the Ambassador said that Minister Lee's and President Roh's comments were harmful and could embolden the DPRK to remain defiant. In reply, Song Min-soon urged the Ambassador to look past what he called media-generated controversy. He said that journalists intentionally baited Lee to make the statements and that President Roh defended the comments in an attempt to put the matter to rest. Like others in MOFAT and NSC, Song asked us to focus on the real work going on to get North Korea back to the table. He said the ROKG wants to work with the USG over the coming weeks to craft a North Korea plan for President Bush and President Roh to endorse at their mid-September

meeting in Washington.

MEANWHILE, WHAT IS THE PLAN FOR NORTH KOREA?

17. (C) The running front-page controversy over Lee's remarks is striking, but perhaps more significant is what is not in the South Korean newspapers lately: any detailed suggestion from government officials or from opinion-makers about what to do about North Korea in the wake of the missile tests and the acrimonious and aborted July session of the Inter-Korean dialogue. Instead, there are signs of getting back to business-as-usual: the MOU's head of the Office for Inter-Korean Economic Projects was quoted in the July 27 press saying that expansion of the Kaesong Industrial Complex, ostensibly on hold after the missile launches, may resume as early as August or September since it is a project that "runs strictly according to market mechanisms."

18. (C) Privately, our MOU, NSC, and MOFAT contacts all agree on two things: contacts with the North are on hold for now, but it is important to "keep the dialogue open," as NSC Assistant Secretary to the President Noh Kyu-duk put it in a July 26 meeting. MOU's Kim said that MOU plans are on hold now and that the Ministry is waiting to see if the DPRK will take any more "soft steps" (steps that express displeasure but don't cost the DPRK significant money). He pointed out that the DPRK, like the ROKG, is being careful not to close the door completely. For example, on July 22 the DPRK withdrew several officials at the Kaesong liaison office that opened last October, but left in place several officials who deal most directly with economic issues in Kaesong.

19. (C) MOFAT Director for North America Division I Hahn Chong-hee gave us a more subtle description of the DPRK's recent actions, saying that the DPRK was taking steps, but would be careful not to anger the ROK because the DPRK sees the ROK as a friend, relatively speaking, in a hostile world community.

110. (C) Asked whether the current impasse endangers MOU's vision of reunifying the Koreas, Kim gave a surprising answer, in light of the ROK Constitution's statement that "The Republic of Korea shall pursue unification, and draw up and implement a peaceful unification policy based on the liberal democratic system." He said that the MOU policy is to build mutual prosperity and peace as a foundation for unification, but that actual unification was at least a generation away. The ROKG had come to this "second-best" approach after learning two lessons: in the early 1990s, that the DPRK was much more resilient than the "regime collapse" analysts thought; and in the late 1990s, after the financial crisis that shook Korea's economy, that the ROK could not possibly afford to absorb the North. Kim's explanation appears to be a franker version of what Minister Lee said in an April 2006 speech: "Considering the huge economic and social gap between the two Koreas, it is inappropriate to pursue immediate unification."

COMMENT

111. (C) The Roh Moo-Hyun administration's responses to the North Korean missile launches have been confused at best. From the beginning, the ROKG did not want to believe that Kim Jong-il would actually order the launches. From President Roh on down the prevailing attitude was that this was just another threat. It is, therefore, not surprising that the ROKG was caught off-guard not knowing how to respond. Within the ROKG, MOFAT and MND pressed heavily that South Korea must join the international community in strongly condemning the launch; they asked for the North-South Ministerials to be canceled or at least postponed and to support a tough UN Security Council resolution. MOU, personified by Unification Minister Lee Jong-seok, argued vehemently that such actions would end the North-South dialogue, which was the same as an open admission that President Roh's North Korea policy had failed. We understand that there were bitter arguments in

the cabinet with the usually cool and suave Foreign Minister Ban Ki-moon losing his temper and walking out on occasions.

¶12. (C) Roh was, of course, not ready to admit that he had no North Korea policy, hence the deafening silence from the Blue House on virtually anything to do with North Korea since the missile launches. This too won't last. Roh, facing a bleak domestic political outlook, is eager to salvage something from his North Korea policy. We expect the ROKG will propose a renewed diplomatic initiative soon to key partners, especially the U.S. If this is not forthcoming, our best guess is that bilateral engagement will be renewed and even deepened.

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